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RUEHK/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9198

RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 4124

RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 6089

RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4534

RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6642

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000809

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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MAIN PARTIES TROT OUT THE OLD GUARD FOR COLOMBO
LOCAL COUNCIL POLLS

REF: COLOMBO 400

¶1. (SBU) Local government elections for the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) and 21 other local government authorities will be held on May 20. Elections in these localities were postponed from March 30 because of assorted court challenges to electoral lists submitted by various parties (Reftel). Besides the race for leadership of the CMC, other significant electoral contests that will take place on May 20 include the Municipal Council in Galle, the second largest city on the island, and the Municipal Council in Gampaha in former President Chandrika Kumaratunga's home district. Local elections in the eastern district of Batticaloa and all the districts in the north have been postponed for security reasons until September 30.

¶2. (SBU) Because of court cases filed by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) challenging the validity of their electoral slates, the two largest parties, President Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP), have been barred from campaigning in their respective traditional strongholds of Gampaha and Colombo under their national party symbols.

(Note: Despite the comparatively high literacy rate in Sri Lanka, party symbols, which function as branding devices on ballot papers, are considered essential to electoral success.) Although both parties are still expected to win overall control of the councils in their traditional stomping-grounds, popular confusion over the party symbols--as well as general voter fatigue after parliamentary elections in 2004 and presidential elections in 2005--may give them less than resounding victories. In general, the Colombo campaign mounted by all contestants, including the usually irrepressible JVP, has ranged from low-key to well-nigh inaudible, especially in comparison to the pull-out-all-the-stops campaigning that preceded local elections held in most of the rest of the country March 30 (Reftel).

¶3. (SBU) Given that the CMC race is the most important local election in the country, the two main parties have made some surprising choices to lead their campaigns as mayoral candidates in Colombo. Both have tipped hardened veterans--but not necessarily victors--of many political battles, whose long years in the rough-and-tumble game of Sri Lankan politics have done little to burnish their reputations. The UNP selection--former Colombo mayor and party stalwart Sirisena Cooray--has disappointed many of the UNP faithful, who were hoping for a fresh face (with a

somewhat cleaner reputation) as their standard-bearer. A close associate of the late President Premadasa, Cooray was appointed for a brief term as the High Commissioner to Malaysia during 1978-79. He served as Mayor of Colombo from 1978-1989 (a term which included the horrific anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983). He was elected as a UNP MP for Colombo in 1989, serving as Housing and Construction Minister in Premadasa's Cabinet and as General Secretary of the UNP from 1991-1993. After losing in parliamentary elections in 1994 (and the death of his patron and protector Premadasa the year before), Cooray, who was suspected of complicity in several high-profile scandals, was asked to step down as General Secretary and resign from the party's Working Committee.

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Cooray spent most of the next decade living abroad, although he returned to Sri Lanka now and then. In 2004, at the behest of UNP MP Milinda Moragoda, UNP Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe brought Cooray back into the party fold.

¶4. (SBU) The SLFP-led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has selected die-hard socialist and long-time rabble-rouser Vasudeva Nanayakkara to lead its Colombo campaign. Nanayakkara's checkered political career has included membership in assorted minuscule and often short-lived political parties (including the Lanka People's Socialist Party, the New People's Socialist Party, the United Socialist Alliance and, most recently, the Democratic Left Front) as well as periodic stints in jail (including a three-year term from 1971-1974 in connection with the first JVP uprising and again in 1987 for burning a bus in front of the U.S. Embassy to protest the Indo-Lanka Accord). By the 1980s, he had broken with the JVP and ran against Rohan Wijeweera (among many others) in the 1982 presidential election, winning just a quarter of a percent of the popular

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vote. Although he has been in and out of Parliament from 1970-2000, Nanayakkara has never served as a Minister or Deputy Minister. He has a reputation in some quarters as a Sinhalese hardliner and anti-Tamil communalist.

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